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Theorising 'race trouble': On racism, racialising practice, and the question of affect

KEVIN DURRHEIM, XOLISWA MTOSE AND LYNDSEY BROWN, *Race trouble: Race, identity and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2011, 234 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86914-199-8 (pbk).

The post-apartheid South African context has given rise to much scholarship grappling with the issues of how to conceptualize racism in contemporary – and particularly transitional – societies. The question of theorizing new and distinctive modalities of racism is a priority both for anti-racism activists and for those interested in the political uses of psychological theory. This being the case, a text by a leading South African social psychologist that promises a novel approach to 'race trouble' has much to offer to an international audience.

Race Trouble is an impressive and timely book. It makes a vital contribution to the study of racialising practices, synthesizing, as it does, a cross-section of different social psychological approaches so as to develop an original response to the political contingencies of post-apartheid South Africa. Three further aspects of the book deserve particular commendation: the fluent survey it offers of the most promising tools available within social psychology; the wonderful use of illustrative devices (textual extracts from recent research, incisive examples drawn from popular culture); and an awareness of the reductive shortcomings of psychological reifications of the supposedly "internal" mechanisms of individual racism. Even more important than these merits is the book's fidelity to the context it describes. So, although the authors draw on a variety of important sources – including Omi & Winant's (1994) notion of 'racial formations' and Essed's influential (1991) idea of 'everyday racism' – there is a constant awareness that these conceptualizations cannot be uncritically incorporated into an analysis of the post-apartheid situation.

It is precisely this attention to the vicissitudes of historical location that grounds the book's most provocative argument. This argument concerns the idea that despite its longstanding political importance the time now is ripe to move beyond a social psychological analysis of *racism*, to the more nuanced possibilities of an analysis of *race trouble*. Given that such a claim will no doubt attract much by way of criticism, it is important that we attend to the particularity of the authors' arguments. Indeed, why should we move away from the concept of racism, which brings with it such an established critical heritage, along with many varied registers of analysis (which enable us to grapple with racism in combinations of its institutional, discursive, inter-subjective and psychological manifestations)? Well, in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, say the authors, it is no longer clear "who is responsible for the persistence of racial segregation and inequality, the charge of racism no longer serves to separate oppressor and oppressed in any simple way" (p. 23). This, for many, remains more of a debatable point than a demonstrable reality. More contentious yet is the assertion that "white racism is no longer the major problem in

intergroup relations in South Africa today" (p. 63), a comment that will no doubt occasion much by way of dissent. Perhaps harder to dispute is the idea that in today's South Africa solidarity across racial lines is no longer adequate to address the perpetuation of economic inequality. As such, the notion of non-racism "no longer serves as a unifying concept under which to wage a struggle for transformation" (p. 16), "inequality within race groups is now more extreme than inequality between groups" (p. 17).

I am perhaps less inclined than Durrheim, Mtose and Brown to do away with the notion of racism altogether as a tool of critical analysis. That being said, I am in agreement with the authors that the flat-footed utilization of this concept can sometimes block more textured, multifaceted types of social analysis, particularly in stances when race is inextricably intertwined with sexuality, ethnicity, class, gender etc. – a point already established by theorists of 'intersectionality'. It is when Durrheim, Mtose and Brown stress the social complexities that are potentially lost in this way, when the notion of racism is wielded as a blunt meta-narrative obscuring other dimensions of social critique - that their argument takes on its most compelling form. "Accusations of racism serve blaming functions, take sides with one perspective over others, and gloss over these complex and diverse forms of subjectivity, reducing them to a universal binary: racist or not" (p. 201). Furthermore: "Surely, the nuance, subtlety and particularity we find in the architecture and choreography of racial practices will be lost by lumping all of these different formations into one large epoch or by applying the label 'modern racism'" (p. 200). However, if "charges of racism...produce [the] conflicting lines of social fracture that are [themselves] the proper object of social analysis" (p. 2), then it would seem that the validity of the above critique has much to do with an assessment of what this suggested 'proper object', that of 'race trouble', is.

How then is 'race trouble' defined? Early on in the book 'race trouble' is introduced as "a social psychological condition that emerges when the history of racism infiltrates the present to unsettle social order, arouse conflict of perspectives and create situations that are individually and collectively troubling" (p. 27). Toward the end of the book 'race trouble' is described as the "positioning of subjects in racially aligned practices of engagement and conflict" (p. 194), as "dynamic and mutually constitutive practices and contexts of social division" (p. 199). What quickly becomes apparent then is that Durrheim, Mtose and Brown's objective is not to turn a blind eye to racism. Quite the contrary, the idea of 'race trouble' hopes precisely to alert us to the myriad ways in practices of racialization - segregation, discrimination, exclusion and so on - are still operative, even if they no longer follow the clear-cut hierarchical or – to borrow from Fanon – 'Manichean' terms in which 'white' and 'black' are mutually-exclusive, internally-consistent categories. "An analysis of race trouble can be distinguished from an analysis of racism as a bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, approach...from our bottom-up perspective we are interested in studying the practices, acts of division and reactions that constitute race trouble" (p. 30).

One question which emerges here is whether the type of analysis that the authors are advocating, that is, one attuned to further complexities and ambiguities within regimes of racializing practice, has not already been advanced within social theory? Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) have long since insisted on a more ambiguous and polyvalent set of 'inter-racial' relations (and, indeed, identifications) than could be grasped through the use of simple binary oppositions. A question then to the authors: have the best conceptualizations of racism not always included an awareness of 'race trouble', at least in the sense that they have been attentive to the multiple lines of social fracture of which racism is part? This would seem a necessary consideration in contexts beyond the extreme racial polarizations of apartheid and/or colonial racism. Indeed, for Marxist and feminist scholars, as in the case of theorists of intersectionality, 'racism' has, in and of itself, never been an adequate basis of substantive social analysis. We could develop this line of critique in another way. If 'race trouble' entails within it an awareness of ongoing racist practices – even if thoroughly attenuated and diffused through other types of power-relation – then surely it is not the notion of racism itself that is the problem. Is it not rather that it is 'bad' analyses of racism that is the root trouble here, analyses, in other words, that are insufficiently attentive to other necessarily linked factors of social division?

A further important issue comes to the fore here. What is potentially lost in substituting the overtly political and ethical agendas associated with the critique of *racism*, to the less obviously political considerations of *race trouble*? The argument could be made – contrary no doubt to the objectives of the authors – that the race trouble notion links less clearly to a social justice imperative than to the task of avoiding various forms of discomfort occasioned by the practices of racialization with which we are (knowingly or unknowingly) complicit. In this respect one should be attentive to how the authors justify and substantiate the 'race trouble' concept. Particularly noticeable here is the language of affect which sneaks into such descriptions. Take the following example: "People feel troubled by race. They feel attacked, undermined, threatened, and they respond with irritation, anger and hostility" (p. 27). Or, in an earlier passage:

We often come away from situations and encounters with a sense of unease, fear or suspicion, wondering whether our actions or treatment by others was influenced by race...this racialisation of social life is deeply troubling...[...]...We usually prefer not to speak or think about race. We are scared of causing offence or social disruption. What is troubling is not the racialisation *per se*, but the persistent questioning of whether or not race is pertinent (p. 24).

Of course for many racialisation, which invariably takes on a discriminatory and evaluative element, *is* itself profoundly troubling. To suggest otherwise, is perhaps only to confirm that the goal of properly political critique has become something of a secondary priority. There are at least two prospective problems that follow from the above recourse to the types of emotional discord characterizing race trouble. Firstly – as already noted - there is the risk of

giving the impression that race trouble is troubling primarily because it is psychologically disruptive. This is a worrisome implication; it is all too easily read as a depoliticization of racialization. It is worth making a comparison here with the notion of 'gender trouble' as Judith Butler (1990) uses the term. 'Gender trouble' for her concerns a *calling into question* of the gendered subject. 'Troubling' here points to a dissipation of what had hitherto been considered substantive identities of gender. The troubling of the subject is not thus a problem. More importantly perhaps, the troubled subject is not the basis of any conceptual justification of the type of analysis Butler goes on to conduct. Her work thus sidesteps the prospective dilemma that Durrheim, Mtose and Brown face, namely that of unintentionally recuperating the psychological subject.

The second potential problem alluded to above concerns the emphasis on the anxieties set in play by racialization. This seems somewhat misplaced in a text that is deeply mistrustful of affective explanations of racism. What becomes apparent in fact is a conspicuous absence in the book's otherwise impressive engagement with the social psychological dynamics of race trouble: the lack of a developed engagement with the affective dimension of such phenomena. This then is the quandary: the race trouble concept itself seems necessarily to imply the quality of affective disturbance – something often apparent in the textual materials cited by the authors - but affect itself is never explicitly theorized as such.

The reason that the authors are so elusive when it comes to questions of affect is that they are committed to a mode of conceptualization that views processes of racialisation as "distributed across society in new, complex and fluid ways [such that they] cannot be...easily pinned down to fixed individuals or groups" (p. 25). In view of the latter objective, and certainly against the tendency to locate racism in any type of a 'depth psychology', they are most certainly right. The subsequent challenge though surely seems to involve thinking affective formations that are both reproduced by and that underpin racializing practices, and to do so in a *distributed* manner which avoids the pitfalls of individualizing (or depth) psychological notions. There are available guidelines for such an approach, certainly so within those texts of cultural and social theory which aim to deploy non-reductive (and non-individualizing) analyses of the affective economies of racism. Take for example Ahmed (2004) approach in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. "[In] an analysis of affective economies" she argues, "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (p. 8). "[F]eelings", she continues, take "a form of social presence rather than a self-presence", emotions thus create "the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside...emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have" (p 10). This means, that

'the subject' is simply one nodal point in [an affective] economy, rather than its origin and destination", that the "sideways and backwards movement of emotions such as hate (p. 46).

The authors are perhaps less far off from such conceptualizations than they realize, certainly in view of how they, like Ahmed, wish to avoid reifying both the psychological subject and intra-psychic terms of analyses. This returns us to one of the stand-out accomplishments of the book: the wonderful set of exemplifications it provides of Billig's (1999) notion of 'Freudian repression'. Billig's aim is to describe a repression as a jointly-managed rhetorical accomplishment; this is repression as it exists on the surface of the spoken word, without any reliance on the dynamics of a depth-psychology model. As they so nicely put it - in terms that unexpectedly invoke the Lacanian notion of an 'external' unconscious that becomes apparent in the instance of speech -

it is possible for an audience to hear in...expression[s] things other than what the speaker wants to intend – even things that may be socially unacceptable. This possibility of unintended hearing arises for the dual reason that all expressions leave some things unsaid and what is said can be understood in more than one way...Expressions do not exhaust the possibility of their meaning (pp. 174-175).

This important attention to repression as a distributed phenomenon is later complemented by means of reference to Butler's notions of performativity – something well overdue in social psychological texts. The value of this explanatory frame is that it assumes "no gendered self behind the scenes directing activity", and as such "All we have are people engaged in discursive and embodied activities" (p. 142). In reference to Harré the claim is made that "there is no pre-existing personality or self", "attributes of self - desires, intentions, thoughts, feelings and so on – are the outcome of activity" (p. 143).

So far, so good: social routines contain and produce subjects. As we are informed later in the same chapter, in reference to the analysis of spatio-discursive topographies of beach-going behaviour, talk and actions are mutually reinforcing. Segregationist practices exhibit a type of "recursivity between subjectivity and social life...[the] identity and talk [of beachgoers]...refer to and reflect ongoing patterns of segregation...a recursive self-producing process whereby racial orders are reproduced and maintained" (p. 161). True as all this no doubt is, a problem emerges in viewing the affective dimension of all these behaviours as simply a bi-product of such procedures. We may agree that affects certainly do arise in relation to social and discursive patterns. Furthermore, we need remain wary of crediting affects with an autonomy or agency exceeding the symbolic frame within which they emerge. That being said, it is nonetheless true that affects bring with them the potential for breaking the mutually-reinforcing patterns of talk and practice discussed above.

The problem with such explanations – where little if anything stands outside the self-reproducing mechanisms of discursive interpellation – is that it becomes difficult to imagine what might successfully disrupt the efficacy of this ideological system. So, when the authors suggest that "Social change require[s]... the development of an alternative ideological tradition and way of being...[a] new historical subject" (p. 146), one is fully warranted in

asking what additional factor would be required in order for this to happen. Two subsequent examples are provided of the 'subject of resistance as historical product': Rosa Parks and Steve Biko. Of course, as much as Parks and Biko clearly were historical subjects, they were also somehow able to step outside of their allocated 'subject-positions' and challenge the racist socio-historical order in which they found themselves. Parks is described as "resisting oppression, an act that required courage...a new way of acting" (p. 147); Biko's famous declaration invoked, namely that "[we must] make the black man come to himself...infuse him with pride and dignity" (p. 147). The common denominator here, which exceeds the idea of resistance as "historical product" is clear enough to see: it is the political importance precisely of affect, be it courage, dignity, or in certain formulations of black consciousness, love itself. My argument is no doubt clear: a notion of affect is deployed here to do explanatory work – slipped in alongside recourse to the historical subject – but it is not adequately integrated into the otherwise impressive analytical frame the authors have developed. More pointedly yet, to think affect here as epiphenomenon, to leave it un-theorized is to miss something crucial about the agency of historical change that is here presumed rather than adequately accounted for. This elision of affect links to another issue: if the notion of repression is utilized, it surely raised the question of why repression is occasioned in the first place? Jointly enacted rhetorical strategies may certainly play their part in the sociality of repression, as might given social norms and regulations of politeness. Surely though what really sets the mechanics of repression in motion is some or other type of affect – (social) anxieties of what is embarrassing, compromising, taboo, humiliating, or indeed, painful?

In conclusion then, the authors have assembled a grid of analysis suitable to the task of apprehending various facets of 'race trouble' – a concept which despite its depoliticizing potential *does* open up the analytical field in a new and exciting way. They are likewise to be commended for the multiple analytical frames that they manage to integrate in *Race Trouble*. There is inspiration to be found in the joint utilization of such ideas (recitation, performativity, distributed repression, spatio-discursive practices, habitus, to name only a few). The psychological and structural analysis of racism has much to learn from such hybrid combinations. The missing piece in this otherwise impressive ensemble of analytical frames – and here one can identify an imperative for the contemporary psychological analysis of racism more generally – is an analysis of the role of racializing affects in race trouble.

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